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In an era of probing newsmen and cameras...

HOW CAN THE GOVERNMENT KEEP A SECRET?

By William E. Colby

How does a Government official keep a secret—and his credibility? How does he reply to the TV interviewer who asks a question about an activity that would stop if revealed? President Ford once said he would gladly share our Government's secrets with all 212 million Americans, if such information would go no further. But if he must keep some secrets from foreigners, how does the director of the CIA answer probing inquiries at a news conference that foreigners are listening to?

Some secrets, after all, do protect the Nation. Secret technology to locate and shoot down foreign nuclear missiles could be jammed if known in detail by a potential enemy. Confidential give-and-take in diplomatic negotiations would be impossible under klieg lights. And disclosure of the intelligence purpose behind an apparently commercial venture can enable a foreign nation to thwart the operation.

But Vietnam and Watergate brought Government secrecy into bad repute. Many Americans found that behind Government secrecy lay failures of policy and abuses of power. Investigative reporters exposing these conditions became folk heroes to an increasingly skeptical public. In this atmosphere, does a Government official raise suspicion of cover-up if he tries to protect a secret? How does he handle the question if the answer would expose, and terminate, a secret source of important information?

"How many covert operations is the (CIA) conducting around the world right now?" a journalist once asked me on NBC's *Meet the Press*. Should I have said "None," since any that existed should be secret and had been undertaken in full compliance with the procedures set out by the Congress for conducting secret operations? No, I didn't hide behind a "None" answer because I had told Sen. Stuart Symington in my confirmation hearings that "You are not going to be lied to by me." In my mind the same rule applied to the American public as to the Congress.

In a recent panel discussion, a newsman said that I had been responsible for a major intelligence leak when I answered a question, on background, affirming that CIA had used American journalists overseas. Another panelist said that he had asked (former CIA director) Allen Dulles the same question in 1960. "He lit his pipe, drew on it and answered 'No.' Didn't he do the right thing?" the panelist inquired.

"Two important events happened in the intervening years," I replied, "Vietnam and Watergate. I believe that an American official cannot any longer lie to the American public—and would be repudiated if he did."

Should I have answered "No comment" to the covert-operations question on *Meet the Press*? In fact, should I even have been in the NBC studio that Sunday?

As I once told a public session of CIA critics, "I am happy to serve under a Constitution that in my view brings me here. . . . It is incumbent upon our Government officials to explain to our public the functions and activities of their organizations."

So I replied to that *Meet the Press* question by saying, "I really cannot give you specifics, but I would say that it is a very small percentage of our total budget at the moment." This answered the main point, but did not reveal secret details.

One probing journalist pressed further, asking whether CIA personnel abroad appeared under the guise of American businessmen. Since this obvious technique is well covered in intelligence literature, I said yes. He then asked the extent of the practice, whether "thousands" of such cases existed. I replied no, many fewer than that. He led me to set the total at roughly 200, which gave him his headline. I thus learned not to use numbers again in such interviews, as the "hard news" quality of the number gave the story major prominence. It appeared in journals throughout the world, embarrassed many ordinary businessmen and brought uncomfortably close attention to the 200 by their normal business associates and by foreign governments.

Depending on the phrasing of the question, sometimes a flat denial can be made. A newsman once asked me about a well-rumored operation that I still hoped would not be exposed. But his specific question was whether it was underway in a different part of the world. I told him his statement was not true, as it was not, and quickly changed the subject.

But even a denial contains the seeds of further difficulties. At my confirmation hearing, Senator Symington had asked me to comment on a news story that CIA had engineered the 1967 coup in Greece. I flatly denied the story, as I knew this to be the right answer. But the senator persisted: "At any time →

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